



# Grandparenting across borders: American grandparents and their Israeli grandchildren in a transnational reality

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## ABSTRACT

Families are increasingly dispersed across national borders. Americans in Israel are one migrant group that represents the worldwide phenomenon of transnationalism. Grandparents separated geographically from their grandchildren develop new means of communication with them and new kinds of relationships. This study uses ethnographic interviews with the grandparents of transnational, American-Israeli children and youth to offer an in-depth examination of the experience of grandparenting across borders. We find that grandparenting children who are both geographically distant and raised in a foreign culture necessitates the development of new ways of maintaining relationships with grandchildren. This study considers the impact of transnational migration on the extended family, on those left behind, who struggle with redefining their roles as grandparents and with the sense of being deprived of the roles they had expected to play.

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“Everyone needs to have access both to grandparents and grandchildren in order to be a full human being”.

[Margaret Mead (1972)]

## Introduction

Globalization and emerging transnationalism are transforming the grandparent–grandchild relationship as grandparents living in one country model new approaches to interacting with their grandchildren overseas. Transnational migrants increasingly crisscross borders on a daily basis, living their financial, political and familial lives in two countries and cultures while maintaining strong and simultaneous connections with both their countries of origin and of residence (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). The effects of these migrations reverberate beyond the migrants' own lives as familial relationships are both cyclical and bidirectional (Banks, 2009; Lie, 2010; Smith, 2006). The

lives of all family members, across generations, are forever changed when kin decide to migrate (Clark, Glick, & Bures, 2009).

This study explores the impact of transnational migration on the American grandparents of transnational American-Israeli grandchildren. By examining the experience of transnational grandparents, we probe the influence of the cultural gulf between grandparents and grandchildren. The present study explores the interaction between the grandparents' own experience and societal beliefs about grandparenting. Studies of migration rarely explore the impact of migration on the communities, family members and individuals left behind (King & Vullnetari, 2006), focusing instead on the experience of the immigrants themselves (e.g., Heikkinen & Lumme-Sandt, 2013). The present study is an in-depth investigation of such individuals and the multiple ways in which migration affects the relationship between grandparent and grandchild.

## Transnational families

The changing nature of global, transnational migration patterns has led to the emergence of diverse family forms, bringing previously held theories about the family into question

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(Salazar Parrenas, 2008). Migration was once conceptualized as a linear movement in which people transferred their lives from the country of origin to their new destination. Today, it has become clear that the ever-increasing number of migrants and migrant communities experience migration as an ongoing movement between two or more social spaces or locations (e.g., Banks, 2009; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007), rather than abandoning one in favor of the other. To date, scholars have focused on the phenomenon of cross-border family life evident in transnational migrant groups. Such studies view geographic separation as part of a predetermined migration strategy (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). For example, in the *astronaut family*, one parent raises the children in the country of migration, while the other remains in the country of origin for financial reasons (Chiang, 2008). Children in these families are known as *satellite children* (Tsang, Irving, Alaggia, Chau, & Benjamin, 2003). Another example, *parachute children*, are most frequently Korean-born and sent to North America to live with extended family or other members of the Korean community in the hope that they will win acceptance to North American universities (Orellana, Thorne, Chee, & Lam, 2001). The maintenance of transnational relationships has been found to be a vital concern in the everyday lives of older migrants (Heikkinen & Lumme-Sandt, 2013).

Transnational family migration studies have documented the emotional costs of long-term separation for both parents and children (Dreby, 2006). These studies include an investigation of the strategies parents and children use for developing intimacy despite geographic separation from one another (e.g., Schmalzbauer, 2008). Transnational mothers retain their mothering roles even while separated from their children, devising novel communication methods to provide a sense of family and continuity for their children (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). Transnational fatherhood has also begun to attract attention, with research among Mexican and Filipino transnational fathers focusing on differences in gender-defined parenting roles (e.g., Dreby, 2006; Salazar Parrenas, 2008). Academic exploration of the experience and consequences of transnationalism for children and youth is also in its initial stages (e.g., Orellana et al., 2001; Sigad & Eisikovits, 2010).

### Grandparenting and transnational grandparents

The family system as a whole should be taken into account when studying migration. While research on grandparenting is evolving rapidly (Werner, Buchbinder, Lowenstein, & Livni, 2007), certain areas of this phenomenon remain insufficiently studied, specifically those relating to grandparents within a transnational context. It is well documented that grandparenthood has many positive effects on the grandparents themselves (e.g., Harwood, 2004) and that geographic and psychological distances are both factors that affect the grandparent–grandchild relationship. Studies have shown that even when grandparents are content with their relationships, they continue to bemoan the lack of contact with their grandchildren (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004a). Globalization renders the grandparent's role even more ambiguous (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004a, 2004b). While the geographic and psychological gaps present in long-distance grandparenting have been recognized (Harwood, 2004), the cultural gap between grandparent and grandchild in a transnational

context has yet to receive scholarly attention (Nesteruk & Marks, 2009).

Scholars have addressed the experience of transnational grandparents as caregivers to grandchildren both “back home” and in their adult children's adopted countries (Da, 2003; Smith, 2006; Zhou, 2012). For example, many Chinese grandparents have taken on the role of transnational caregivers for their immigrant grandchildren in Canada (Zhou, 2012). The changing role of grandmothers of transnational African-Caribbean migrant families in Britain has been noted in the literature. Traditionally, these grandmothers lived close to their grandchildren and played a significant role in child rearing, including providing economic support and socialization. They continue to perform this role despite geographic separation, but have lost the central position they once held (Plaza, 2000).

Grandparents are also the occasional agents of discipline when transnational migrants' adolescent children go astray. Yemenite youth living in the United States are sometimes sent to stay with their grandfathers in Yemen to gain what is perceived as critical moral direction (Orellana et al., 2001). Grandparents in countries of origin also occasionally provide a temporary safety net, rescuing children from perceived negative environmental influences in the Mexican immigrant community in New York (Smith, 2006) as well as in the Caribbean and South American migrant communities throughout the U.S. (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

In this study we seek to fill in some of the above-mentioned gaps in the scholarly study of transnational grandparents by seeking answers to the following guiding questions: How do grandparents view the experience of grandparenting across borders? How do they bridge the cultural and geographic gaps between themselves and their grandchildren? How does grandparenting from afar affect the grandparents' sense of their roles? What does the study of transnational migration and grandparenting teach us about the role of the elderly in society? In pursuing our research we will describe and analyze how grandparents contribute to the transnational lives of their grandchildren and how they assess that contribution. In addition, we will investigate how they perceive their own roles in maintaining cross-border familial ties. In so doing, we offer to enlarge our understanding of societal views of the role of the grandparent.

### Context: North American immigrants in Israel

Americans in Israel are one migrant group that represents the global phenomenon of transnationalism. Their lives cross social spheres in that they maintain multiple, daily links to the United States even as they live out daily life in Israel (Sigad & Eisikovits, 2009, 2010). About 120,000 American Jews have immigrated to Israel since the founding of the state in 1948. American culture and the English language enjoy high status in Israel (Ben-Rafael, 1994), thereby encouraging migrants and their children to identify as transnationals who maintain daily connections with their culture of origin. American-born Jews are ambivalent about the duration of their residence in Israel. An estimated 40 to 60% eventually return to the United States, the highest rate of return among migrant groups in Israel. Moving closer to family is frequently cited as the motivation for this return migration (Waxman, 1989). Those migrants who choose to remain in Israel use

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